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BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

COMPLETED
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Greater Use Of Exemplary Education Programs Could Improve Education For Disadvantaged Children

SUMMARY

Although low-achieving students in many of the Nation's federally funded compensatory elementary and secondary education projects have improved their performance, large percentages of students in some projects continue to fall further behind their peers.

The National Diffusion Network is the primary system the Department of Education uses in meeting its statutory mandate to disseminate information about successful educational practices in State and local education agencies to improve the quality and effectiveness of Federal programs. Although some schools have adopted the Network's exemplary projects, the number of adoptions is too small to greatly affect the overall quality of the Nation's compensatory education projects. A greater effort should be made to identify projects needing improvement, and better data on the effectiveness of the Network's exemplary projects should be made available to school officials.

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

GREATER USE OF EXEMPLARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS COULD IMPROVE EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

D I G E S T

Federal programs for elementary and secondary education are intended to help disadvantaged students acquire basic education skills, improve their rate of academic achievement, and ultimately help them become self-sufficient and self-supporting. By far the largest of these programs is that authorized under title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Title I was envisioned as a potent tool for dealing with poverty and its attendant conditions, such as illiteracy, high dropout rates, delinquency, and crime. (See p. 1.)

To improve the effectiveness of these programs, the Congress mandated that the Department of Education (ED) disseminate information about successful education practices to State and local education agencies.

The National Diffusion Network, established by ED in 1974, disseminates information on various "exemplary" education projects that have been found highly effective. The Network is ED's primary mechanism for disseminating information on exemplary title I projects and for helping local school districts to implement such projects. GAO reviewed the Network's performance in helping local school districts to improve their title I projects by adopting exemplary projects. (See pp. 2, 6, and 7.)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING TITLE I BY ADOPTING EXEMPLARY PROJECTS

Although many title I reading projects are improving the academic achievements of educationally disadvantaged students, some projects are not successful and should be improved. GAO's analysis of student progress in about 340 schools in 14 districts revealed that many students continue to fall behind their normal (average) achieving peers. Title I services are discontinued for most students while they are still far behind their peers in academic achievement. Furthermore, many needy students are

excluded from receiving title I services because of the high cost of some projects and limitations on the amount of available funds. (See pp. 8, 9, 11, and 12.)

GAO's comparisons of the accomplishments of title I projects with the reported capabilities of the Network's exemplary title I projects indicated that many school districts could improve their title I services by adopting exemplary projects. Not only were the exemplary projects reporting greater achievements, but they sometimes cost less and could serve more students. (See pp. 9 to 11.)

GREATER EFFORTS NEEDED TO ENCOURAGE ADOPTION OF EXEMPLARY TITLE I PRACTICES

Some school districts have adopted exemplary projects for title I settings, but the number of adoptions is too small to have any significant impact on improving the effectiveness of title I in meeting its nationwide goals. (See p. 17.)

Evaluation criteria and State monitoring need improvement

Title I administration has shortcomings at the Federal, State, and local levels. ED has not prescribed adequate criteria for State and local title I officials to use in assessing their projects, and Federal monitoring has been weak and has failed to emphasize project quality. Similarly, State education agencies have provided limited monitoring of local project results and have not ensured the adequacy of project evaluations and the effectiveness of title I projects.

Without adequate Federal and State emphasis on project quality, relatively few local school districts have sought to improve title I projects. Local title I officials generally have not used project evaluations in project planning and improvement and, in some cases, have not developed local evaluations that are suitable for identifying project weaknesses. (See pp. 17 and 18.)

Information is needed on accomplishments of exemplary projects

Relatively little information is available about the capabilities and accomplishments of the Network's exemplary projects. Therefore, local school district officials are not convinced that exemplary projects are better than their own, and few school districts have sought to implement these projects. (See p. 28.)

Increased followup of project adoptions is needed

Little is known about the achievements of school districts which have adopted exemplary projects because the Network has made little attempt to follow up on project adoptions.

The Network's revised operating instructions call for monitoring and evaluating project adoptions and for providing data on project outcomes at the adoption sites. The revised instructions, however, do not specify

--the nature of monitoring and evaluation to be performed or

--the data to be collected and reported on project outcomes. (See p. 30.)

Limited data about results also hampered Network officials in assessing the Network's impact on the title I program. Because the Network did not have uniform reporting requirements for its operations, it did not have reliable information on the number of exemplary project adoptions that served title I projects. (See p. 33.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the procedures for identifying and correcting title I project weaknesses, the Secretary of Education should

--provide substantially increased guidance and technical assistance to State and local school officials in developing criteria for assessing the effectiveness of title I projects;

--expand ED's monitoring efforts for assessing whether State education agencies are (1) meeting their responsibilities to evaluate the effectiveness of local title I projects and (2) helping local school districts to improve their title I projects;

--direct State education agencies to (1) assess the validity of procedures local school districts use to evaluate their title I projects, (2) prescribe corrective measures where procedures are inadequate, and (3) help local school officials use evaluations for detecting and correcting project weaknesses; and

--advise State education agencies to encourage local school officials to use Network assistance in improving title I projects.

To convince potential adopters of the merits of exemplary projects, the Secretary should direct the Network to provide complete, current information about the capabilities and accomplishments of the Network's exemplary projects, including (1) their impact on scholastic achievement, student behavior, and sustained growth, (2) their cost effectiveness, and (3) the results of past adoptions by other schools.

To provide more accurate data on the volume of title I adoptions and ensure that adoptions are successful, the Secretary should make sure that the Network's plans to require followup on project adoptions are adequate to (1) provide accurate data on the number of adoptions and the schools affected, (2) determine whether the projects have been installed correctly and are functioning properly, and (3) provide for additional implementation assistance where needed. (See pp. 36 and 37.)

AGENCY COMMENTS

In a draft of this report, GAO proposed that ED prescribe specific criteria for State and local officials to use in assessing the effectiveness of title I projects. In its response to the draft (see app. III), ED disagreed with GAO's proposal. ED believes that its October 12, 1979, title I evaluation regulations, which provide

models and technical standards for evaluating title I projects, are adequate criteria on evaluation.

GAO believes that ED's obligation in fulfilling its requirements does not end with the publication of evaluation models and technical standards. ED should place increased emphasis on providing technical assistance at the State and local levels in developing criteria for assessing the effectiveness of title I projects. This would be consistent with ED's long-standing policy of nonintervention in the programmatic decisionmaking process at the State and local levels.

According to ED, implementation of the title I evaluation system will permit local school districts to assess their title I achievement gains on the same metric or scale and therefore permit States to review results across school districts. ED said that national aggregation will enable State and local education agencies to view the levels of their gains in light of the ranges of gains reported nationally. Additionally, ED should use the national, regional, State, and district level information that it collects to provide increased guidance to State and local officials concerning criteria for assessing the effectiveness of title I projects; GAO has revised its recommendation accordingly. ED agreed with the thrust of GAO's other recommendations. ED's comments are discussed on pages 37 through 42.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ED	Department of Education
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965
GAO	General Accounting Office